

European Parliament's Work on Belarus: an Insider's Perspective

The European Parliament is a key European Union institution responsible for EU foreign policy. However, in some areas this institution is referred to as the EU's "talking shop" and its effectiveness remains contested. The European Parliament's approach to Belarus exemplifies precisely this point.

Among all of the European Parliament mechanisms, the work of the European Parliament's Parliamentary Delegation for relations with Belarus represents the least effective means of addressing the situation inside the country. European Parliament resolutions can serve to attract public attention to the problems in Belarus but their real effect remains debatable. However, the individual initiatives of Members of Parliament (MEPs) provide a good platform for discussing the situation in Belarus.

Work of EP Specialised Committees

The Parliament carries out much of its work on foreign policy towards Belarus in its Specialised Committees of Directorate General on External Policy (DG EXPO), notably in the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and its two subcommittees (on Security and Defence/SEDE and on Human Rights/DROI).

These committees shape the EU's foreign policy through its reports and opinions. Each committee has a person from the Secretariat (Administrator) who is responsible for following the developments between the EU and Belarus. The Administrator prepares an agenda for the meetings and invites guest speakers. In the case of Belarus these are representatives of civil society, as no government officials have participated

thus far.

During the meeting the Chair introduces the guests and after their presentations opens the floor for questions from the MEPs in attendance. However, very often the guest speakers have a rather short amount of time for their presentations and a real active discussion seldom takes place. Committee meetings serve as an important mechanism of inter-institutional cooperation between the Parliament, the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

The European Parliament often invites the representatives of these institutions who deal with EU-Belarus relations for an exchange of views or updates, putting public pressure on them to act in a certain direction. This is the case, for example, with EU Commissioner Štefan Füle, who spoke at the Parliament several times on the implementation of the Dialogue on Modernisation in Belarus.

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Although the Committee's work represents a good mechanism for formulating EU foreign policy towards Belarus, there is a room for improving its internal efficiency. The committees could provide more time for critical discussion and Q&A sessions, pay more attention to following up after the meetings and take concrete feedback from the participants.

MEPs Initiatives at the European Parliament

The members of the European Parliament who play an active role with regards to the situation in Belarus are mostly Polish, Lithuanian and German nationals.

Among them are MEPs Justas Vincas Paleckis, Leonidas Donskis, Filip Kaczmarek, Jacek Protasiewicz, Pawel Kowal and Werner Schulz. Apart from participating in committee meetings, MEPs

can organise conferences and debates devoted to a certain topic. For example, Filip Kaczmarek has recently organised a conference on creating a dialogue on modernisation with Belarusian society which took place at the European Parliament on the 9th of April 2013.

The list of speakers on one of the panels included experts from the European External Action Service (EEAS), European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Nordic Council of Ministers. All of them stressed that relations with Belarus are not improving because the Belarusian authorities had not freed its political prisoners.

Usually these kinds of MEP initiatives provide a better opportunity for guest speakers to be heard. A less formal format of such conferences, and the social events which follow them, presents a good networking opportunity for its participants. In addition, MEPs have a personal interest in organising such meetings because it increases their visibility in the Parliament.

Work of the EP Parliamentary Delegation

Another important European Parliament's mechanism for foreign policy work are its parliamentary delegations. Their work on maintaining and developing Parliament's international contacts.

The Delegation for relations with Belarus started its work in 1994 and since 5 June 2012 MEP Filip Kaczmarek has acted as its chairman. The Delegation for relations with Belarus currently has no official relations with the Belarusian parliament or government. There is no Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) between the EP and the national parliament of Belarus because the ratification of EU-Belarus Partnership and cooperation agreement was frozen back in 1997.

The members of the delegation could not travel to Belarus in recent years because the authorities in Minsk have repeatedly

refused to provide them with entry visas. For example, in March 2006 the Belarusian authorities refused entry to all seven members of the European Parliamentary Delegation, including former Vice-Chair MEP Joseph Muscat, to monitor the presidential elections in Belarus.

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Members of the delegation meet regularly in Brussels and in Strasbourg to discuss various Belarus-related developments. But very often the attendance of MEPs at such meetings remains rather low and the topics brought up for discussion are repetitive.

For the moment the work of the Delegation is probably the least efficient means of addressing the situation in Belarus. It is possible to considerably improve it after the establishment of the PCC between the European Parliament and the Belarusian Parliament.

Resolutions as an instrument of EP's foreign policy

The European Parliament exercises its foreign policy vis-à-vis third countries through one of its important instruments – resolutions. Over the past 19 years Parliament has adopted 37 resolutions exclusively on Belarus. They address a general political situation in the country or deal with more specific issues, such as the state of civil society, the arrests of political opponents and civil society representatives.

In all its resolutions on Belarus, the European Parliament expresses a consistent message, criticising the Belarusian regime for its violations of human rights and calling on the authorities to free its political prisoners, ensure media freedoms and provide the necessary electoral reforms. For example, in its resolution from the 15th of September

2011, the Parliament called for the immediate and unconditional release of human rights defender Ales Bialatski. Belarusian authorities had sentenced him to prison for almost five years for allegedly concealing his income on a large scale.

Given the unprecedented crackdown on civil society in Belarus following the presidential elections in December 2010, MEPs expressed their concerns that the criminal case against Ales Bialatski was politically motivated and intended to obstruct his legitimate work as a human rights defender. They called on the authorities to release Ales Bialatski and carry out a fair investigation and drop all the charges against him.

However, although resolutions play an important role in attracting public attention to a certain problem and serve as a good tool for shaming a country, they remain non-binding declarations. The extent to which they can put a real pressure on the regime remains debatable. Indeed, even though the aforementioned resolution has attracted so much public attention, the great Belarusian human rights defender Ales Bialatski still remains in prison.

European Parliament and Belarus: a zero-sum game?

The European Parliament is an important and powerful EU institution, which helps to shape public opinion and create a platform for discussion of the situation in Belarus. Over the years it has developed a practice of intensive inter-institutional interactions to obtain information on current foreign policy issues in Belarus.

A clear strategy of engaging civil society in Belarus does not exist, and increased financial support for the third sector with transparent and effective control mechanisms is also presently absent. Another important area for Belarusians is the facilitation of the visa regime. Although the European Parliament provides a platform to debate these issues, little

real progress has been made. Without adjusting some of its mechanisms to Belarus, the European Parliament risks to play a zero-sum game with Belarus.

Alla Leukavets

Alla completed a Robert Schuman traineeship programme at the DG EXPO of the European Parliament in March-August 2013.

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